

BOOK REVIEW

Joseph Adler, *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2014, 341 pp., ISBN: 9781438451572.

Reconstructing the Confucian Dao offers up the carefully tended fruits of Joseph Adler's research and reflections on a long standing mystery in the annals of Song dynasty (960–1279) Neo-Confucianism (*lixue*). The mystery surrounds a striking addition Zhu Xi (1130–1200) made to the Confucian *Dao* succession (*Daotong*),¹ an addition that augured far-reaching consequences for Neo-Confucianism. It must be stressed that the *Dao* succession not only served to define the orthodox tradition but also underscored the religious dimension of Confucianism by honoring those masters whose teachings most perfectly clove to, and expressed what was deemed to be Confucianism's essence.² In *Confucian the Dao*, Adler brings the implications of this religious dimension, and related practice, into play. Zhu Xi's striking addition was not just his inclusion of Zhou Dunyi (1017–73) in the Confucian *Dao* succession; it was his identification of Zhou as the progenitor of the Song rebirth of the *Dao* succession, nearly 1,500 years after the passing of its last classical participant, Mencius (372–289 BCE).

The first half of the book probes the mystery of Zhu Xi's addition of Zhou Dunyi to the *Dao* succession while the second half provides Adler's translations of major Zhou Dunyi texts as well as of some of Zhu Xi's writings on Zhou. Notably, Adler brings fresh insight to the familiar texts on the basis of his reflections on the mystery, while also bringing new materials to the table which reveal the essential religiosity of Zhu Xi's intent in elevating Zhou Dunyi. Importantly, Adler's annotations to the translations cast light on the special features of Zhou Dunyi's life and writings that attracted Zhu Xi.

The book is very well organized: Part I gives Adler's succinct account of the mystery and his strategy, data, and arguments for tackling and solving the mystery in an introduction and four chapters: 1) "Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi, and the Confucian *dao*," 2) "Zhou Dunyi's Role in the *daotong*," 3) "The Interpenetration of Activity and Stillness," and 4) "*Taiji* as 'Supreme Polarity.'" Part II includes Adler's fresh "Translations of Zhou Dunyi's Major Works and

¹ *Daotong* is typically understood as a "transmission of teachings"; however, Adler uses "succession" to clarify that the *Daotong* is the listing of a succession of Confucian masters rather than their transmitted teachings.

² In his Preface to *Centrality and Commonality (Zhongyong)*, Zhu Xi identifies this essence in the sage kings' teaching of *zhong* (centrality, utmost propriety), holding fast the *zhong*, and juxtaposing the human mind and the mind of the Way (64).

Zhu Xi's Commentaries, with Further Discussions by Zhu Xi and His Students": 5) "The Supreme Polarity Diagram," 6) "Discussion of the Supreme Polarity Diagram," 7) "Penetrating the Scripture of Change," and 8) "Zhu Xi's Postfaces and Notes." An extensive bibliography and comprehensive index are also provided.

The mystery of Zhou Dunyi's addition to the Confucian *Dao* succession is deeply intriguing because, as Adler points out, there were many *prima facie* reasons to disqualify Zhou Dunyi from membership in this elite Confucian pantheon. Principally, Zhou Dunyi's Confucian pedigree was uncertain: his texts contained Daoist key terms, such as *Taiji* (supreme polarity) and especially *wuji* (non-polarity),³ as well as Buddhist predilections, such as *zhujing* (emphasizing tranquility),⁴ and his famous *Taiji* diagram had been bequeathed to him by alchemical Daoists.⁵ Moreover, while he espoused Confucian moral psychology and cultivation, Zhou had focused on cosmic *qi* transformation from the perspective of *wuji*, *taiji*, and yin-yang, and anticipated nothing like the brothers Cheng Hao (1032–85) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107)'s notions of *tian* (heaven) and *li* (pattern, principle) which particularly in Zhu Xi's hands, would become hallmarks of Song Neo-Confucianism (69–70). Adler, moreover, adds a list of historical reasons why Zhou's teachings should not have sat well with the teachings of the Cheng brothers, who followed him in Zhu Xi's reckoning of the *Dao* succession (but who were viewed as the rightful progenitors of the Song renewal of the *Dao* succession by most Southern Song (1127–1279) Neo-Confucians): the Cheng brothers' discourses include no mention of Zhou's fundamental terms *taiji* and *wuji*; Zhou makes only slight use of the Chengs' term *li* and then never as a cardinal term; the Chengs refer to Zhou by his personal name Maoshu rather than his honorific, Lianxi, which would have been unlikely had they regarded him as their master; and Zhou reportedly had received his *Taiji* diagram from Daoist circles, from which Zhu Xi normally would have distanced himself (70–71).

Adler notes that while Zhu Xi's opponents made the most of these and other considerations when questioning his motives, not to mention wisdom, in adding Zhou Dunyi to the Confucian pantheon, he tended to brush off their criticisms and to quietly bridge Zhou's ideas with the Cheng brothers' teachings. Later, Zhu

³ *Taiji* also appears in an early Confucian commentary on the *Scripture of Change* (*Yijing*), the *Xici* (74).

⁴ The idea of "emphasizing tranquility" easily conduced to meditation, which was taught as "quiet-sitting" by the Cheng brothers' student Yang Shi (1053–1135), who brought their teachings south. Zhu Xi was trained in this southern tradition and his teacher Li Tong (1103–63) stressed "quiet-sitting" (70).

⁵ Interestingly, Zhu Xi himself annotated an important alchemical Daoist text by Wei Boya, *Cantongqi* (155).

Xi supporters also sought to accommodate Zhou's teachings of *taiji* and *wuji* to the Cheng-Zhu system of *li* and *qi*. Indeed, at the philosophical level, Zhou's teachings helped Zhu Xi find a way to mitigate the risk that people would regard *li* and *qi* dualistically (see Thompson 2015). Interestingly, Adler does not think that such intellectual concerns would have prompted or warranted Zhu Xi to elevate Zhou Dunyi to the pantheon of the Confucian elite; for if that had been Zhou's primary concern he could have used the *taiji* passage from the *Xici* to solve the problem.

In pondering the mystery of Zhu's elevating Zhou to the pantheon of the Confucian elite, Adler notices that the notion of a *Dao* succession was more of a religious than a purely philosophical or intellectual notion. The idea of an orthodox Confucian succession had been conceived and defended by Han Yu (768–824) in the Tang dynasty (618–907) to buttress Confucianism's response to the *religious* challenge posed by Buddhism, Chan Buddhism in particular (24–26). Moreover, Han Yu wanted to recover the spiritual, ethical Confucianism of classical times,⁶ and introduced the idea of a *Dao* succession as an essentially religious response to the Buddhist traditions of a succession of masters and of the transmission of the lamp.⁷ Han Yu's notion of a Confucian *Dao* succession lost steam in the Tang but was picked up and developed by Northern Song (960–1127) Confucian scholars in their renewed effort to establish a bond to fundamental Confucianism, seeking not only to meet the religious and social challenges of Chan Buddhism and religious Daoism, but also to convey a clearer sense of their own ideals, values, and cultivations—that is, their spiritual essence.

Adler's key finding is that Zhu Xi's addition of Zhou Dunyi to the Confucian pantheon not only occurred on the heels of a deep personal and spiritual crisis but was accompanied by the beginning of his careful study of Zhou Dunyi's notion of the interpenetration of activity and stillness. What about this notion struck Zhu Xi as so promising and vital for overcoming his spiritual crisis?

Adler recounts Zhu Xi's period of acute spiritual crisis in the late 1160s. Zhu Xi commenced his study with Li Tong (1103–63)⁸ in 1153 and became his "follower" in 1160. Li Tong stressed stillness (tranquility) and cultivation by "quiet-sitting." The inspiration for his approach was the closing section of chapter one of the *Centrality and Commonality* (Zhongyong), which contains a

⁶ During the Han and Tang periods, mainstream Confucianism tended to be bureaucratic, ideological, and careerist, and had lost its compelling spiritual-ethical essence.

⁷ Adler notes Schlutter's (2008) argument that the famous notion of a Chan Buddhist direct mind-to-mind transmission of the lamp during the Tang (618–907) was a Song dynasty (960–1279) concoction, and Jorgensen's (2005) case that the stories of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638–713) were just stories made up during the Song. I would tend to think there are threads of fact behind this Chan transmission and the Huineng stories.

⁸ Li Tong belonged to Yang Shi's southern school of Cheng brother learning. See n. 4 above.

description of the “expressed and unexpressed” (*yifa-weifa*) mental states of a well-cultivated person: when responding to a situation, her emotions are expressed in due degree and she hits the utmost propriety. In the prior state, before her emotions are expressed, her mind is clear and transparent such that her nature is evident and her mind is alert in tranquility. Zhu Xi admired Li Tong, a teacher his late father had recommended to him a decade earlier, but as an active learner and practitioner Zhu was psychologically unsuited for Li’s seemingly passive meditative approach; this caused Zhu remorse, especially after Li’s passing in 1163.

Soon after Li’s passing, Zhu Xi became acquainted with Zhang Shi (1133–80), a scion of the Hunan lineage of the Cheng brothers’ learning who had been initiated by the recently-deceased Hu Hong (1106–61). Following Hu Hong, Zhang Shi contended that since the mind is always active and alert, the unexpressed state only characterizes “the nature” and is not involved in the play of the mind and the expression of the emotions except as a ground. His point was that since the nature is simply there as a ground, one’s cultivation efforts should be directed toward the proper expression of the emotions and play of the mind in action. He therefore stressed being reflective in one’s practice, whether in cultivation or learning. Frustrated with Li Tong’s approach, which seemed insufficiently dynamic, Zhu Xi readily took Zhang Shi’s cue and adopted Hu Hong’s theory and reflective approach to cultivation, learning, and practice. Over time, however, Zhu Xi found this reflective approach to cultivation and practice to be equally unworkable. He found that if he tried to be reflective in the course of handling affairs as they came up, he could not focus or determine the most appropriate response in a timely way. It was like trying to smell the roses (cultivate), read the signs (study), and rule the kingdom (practice) from horseback all at once: it couldn’t properly be done. No such activities could be done well unless one was steady (tranquil, in equilibrium) and poised (in equipoise).⁹

Zhu Xi again found himself stuck in a deep funk. The common story has it that he found a way out of this predicament by orienting cultivation and practice on activity *or* stillness *via* Cheng Yi’s notion of “reverent composure” (*jing*), a term which had religious overtones yet was extended by Zhu and other Neo-Confucians to include concentration and alertness¹⁰ (I like Michael Kalton’s suggestive rendering of *jing* as “mindfulness” in connection with his study of

⁹ I adapt this term to suggest that the mind and emotions are not only in equilibrium but poised to respond to whatever comes up. On reflection, both Li Tong’s and Zhang Shi’s positions were infected by a troublesome dualism between the expressed and unexpressed states of the emotions and play of the mind (activity and stillness).

¹⁰ In classical Confucianism, “reverent composure” was the appropriate mental state for worshiping and conducting sacrifices to one’s ancestors.

traditional Korean readings of Cheng-Zhu thought [Kalton 1988]). What was suggestive about reverent composure for Zhu Xi was that, according to the Cheng brothers, reverent composure is a cultivated attitude that embraces and runs through both the expressed and unexpressed states of mind and the emotions. Reverent composure keeps the mind set on its proper bearings, and the emotions in sync with their ground in the nature. Cultivating reverent composure in quietude purifies the emotions and mind such that it is limpid and responsive. Moreover, maintaining reverent composure in action vitally preserves the bearings of the mind and the propriety of the emotions such that one’s responses and actions attain the utmost propriety, just as a perfectly calm and focused archer will hit the bullseye.¹¹

Adler doesn’t accept that this conception of reverent composure fully met Zhu Xi’s requirements for intellectual and religious practice, for it still did not provide a working account of the relationship, the vital nexus, between activity and stillness; it could not close this gap, which brimmed with ontological as well as practical implications. Adler’s principal breakthrough is twofold: first, he finds that Zhu Xi began to show interest in Zhou Dunyi’s writings and ideas at a time of acute spiritual crisis, and second, that besides his interest in Zhou’s terms including supreme polarity and non-polarity, Zhu became deeply interested in Zhou’s account of the interpenetration of activity and stillness. In his writings, Zhou successfully connected these ideas to form a living continuum, which in turn yielded a dynamic, organic holism that the Cheng brothers’ dualistic conception of *li* (pattern, principle) and *qi* (cosmic vapor) could not deliver.¹²

While this captures Adler’s basic solution to the mystery of the *Dao* succession, he does not rest there. He goes on to excavate neglected data concerning Zhou Dunyi’s life, learning, thought, and practice, and moreover to examine Zhu Xi’s diverse efforts both to sanctify Zhou Dunyi and his writings and to express his utmost respect for Zhou’s wisdom and insight. Indeed, Adler shows that Zhu’s activities included preparing new editions of Zhou’s writings and authoring prefaces, commentaries, postscripts, essays, letters, and official memorials concerning Zhou and his ideas, as well as restoring structures related to Zhou, commissioning temples and monuments dedicated to him, preparing plaques, leading memorial prayers and offerings, and so on. Zhu Xi conducted these activities with a sort of religious fervor, attesting to the importance that Zhou’s penetrating insight into the interpenetration of stillness and activity held for him and how it showed him the way to further moral cultivation, learning, and practice.

It must be noted as well that Zhou Dunyi’s writings have a definite spiritual

¹¹ This anticipates Wang Yangming’s idea of enlightened action to a certain extent.

¹² Zhu Xi eventually expounded a complementarity-focused conception of reality that embraced and unified even the polar ontological categories of *li* and *qi* (Thompson 2015).

appeal. They are exquisitely written, at once oracular and poetic. Nothing in the Cheng brothers' corpus of commentaries, prefaces, essays, letters, recorded sayings, or even poems comes close to Zhou's incisive writing, which Zhu Xi found to be peerless among the works of the latter-day Confucians. Fortunately, in the second half of *the Dao*, Adler provides fresh translations of major Zhou Dunyi texts, as well as related Zhu Xi materials.

Adler's translations are interesting and informative, for they reflect his special insight into the religiosity that underlay Zhu Xi's interest in Zhou and his writings. For example, Adler renders the term *jing* (usually "classic") as "scripture" both to underscore its basically religious status and to reflect that the text was originally a manuscript. He renders *taiji* (usually "supreme ultimate") as "supreme polarity" in light of its inseparability from yin-yang and the feeling that "supreme ultimate" does not really communicate a clear meaning. He renders *cheng* (sincerity, creativity) as "authenticity," which captures the existential commitment implied in the term. His translation of *zhong* (usually tranquility, equilibrium, utmost propriety) as "centrality" is also highly suggestive.

Now I wish to raise a few scholarly quibbles, none of which detract from the thesis or argument of the book but which are perhaps of interest in their own right. Interestingly, the author remarks that "the earlier parts of the *Analects* predate the first known written forms of the *Laozi*" (p. 22, n. 27). At the same time, the two earliest extant *Analects* manuscripts date from the early Han (c. 100 BCE) while the earliest *Laozi* script, excavated at Guodian, dates from the mid-Warring States period (c. 300 BCE). Admittedly, the Shanghai Museum holds a manuscript titled "Master Kong's Discussions on the *Odes*" (*Kongzi Shi lun*), which might date from 300 BCE. However, this script is of unknown provenance and considered a possible forgery.¹³ Moreover, it contains no allusions to the *Analects*, which does not inspire confidence in its authenticity.

The author uncritically accepts Plaks' (2003) skepticism regarding Kong Ji's authorship of *Centrality and Commonality (Zhongyong)*. The problem is that Plaks' argument trades on the identification of Zisi (whom tradition regards as the author) with Kong Ji (a grandson of Confucius) (p. 49 n. 42). However, as Csikszentmihalyi (2004) convincingly shows, the identification of Zisi with Kong Ji was concocted during the Han, perhaps to add luster to Zisi as a progeny of Confucius; so, doubts regarding Kong Ji's authorship need not reflect on the possibility of Zisi's authorship, for which I see several positive arguments. First, a number of the pre-Qin manuscripts excavated at Guodian in 1993 match chapters in the *Record of Rites (Liji)* that are traditionally attributed to Zisi.

¹³ Such an "ancient" text would command a very high price on the antiquities market. The perpetrators could fool scientific dating techniques by writing on unmarked excavated ancient bamboo strips using unearthened ancient ink materials.

Second, several other of these excavated manuscripts contain passages that attest to the opening passages of *Centrality*. Third, one of the manuscripts excavated at Guodian was titled *Five Modes of Moral Conduct (Wuxingpian)*, and the *Xunzi* specifically associates Zisi with a teaching of *wuxing*.¹⁴ The texts all embody Zisi's recognized concern for ritual propriety and proper conduct in general, which is the heart of *Centrality*.

Lastly, the author regards "hitting the mark" or "getting it right" as a connotation of *zhong*, whose "literal meaning" is centrality (124 n. 62). However, etymologically, "hitting the bull's eye" was the original meaning of *zhong*; the graph vividly depicts an arrow striking the center of a target. This became an image for doing just the right thing in conduct, as well as for conducting the rites and sacrifices with the utmost propriety. This image was particularly apt given the highly ritualized nature of archery contests held by Zhou nobility, as evidenced in the *Analects*. This sense of *zhong* is well captured in chapter 1 of *Centrality*: "When these feelings are expressed and each and all attain their due measure and degree (i.e., *zhong* as hit the mark, utmost propriety), it is called harmony (*he*)" (82). Etymologically, centrality was an early connotation, which eventually became the literal meaning. Adler's translation of the passage that he discusses in footnote 62 becomes contradictory when he insists on using the moderation-stressing term "centrality" [middle, mean] rather than the perfection-stressing term "hitting the utmost propriety":

Centrality (*zhong*) is the utmost extreme ... of the Way. Therefore, centrality is called ... "the ultimate." The ridgepole of a house is also called ... [the ultimate], because it is both the center and the highest part.

The static nature of the ridgepole here perhaps seems to conflict with the dynamic nature of "hitting the mark," but the implied meaning of "utmost propriety" brings their association closer. Furthermore, there is in fact a tacit dynamic at work with the ridgepole whose function is to offset the force of gravity and provide just the right balance and support to sustain the roof. In this context, the center would be "center of gravity," which would be the dynamic center rather than the spatial center, and hence could be construed as the "bullseye" of the architect and builders.

In conclusion, Joseph Adler's *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao* marks a most

¹⁴ Traditionally, this was a confusing association, since *wuxing* also referred to a conception of the formation of matter from five basic phases of earth, wood, fire, metal, and water. However, the excavated *Wuxing pian* is clearly a systemization of Confucius' basic virtues, as implied in Xunzi's statement. Moreover, *Wuxingpian* appeals to the *Odes* in making points or concluding arguments, much as is done in the later chapters of *Centrality* as well as the *Great Learning (Daxue)*.

profound contribution to Neo-Confucian studies, particularly with regard to Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi, and the *Dao* succession. Importantly, Adler's well-wrought account of Zhu Xi's intellectual-religious appropriation from Zhou Dunyi demonstrates without a doubt that Zhu's resulting philosophic stance and religious practice must be understood as "nondualis[t]" or "mitigated nondualis[t]" (101 n 83). Adler writes,

In Zhu Xi's view...[and] personal practice, "activity in stillness" and "stillness in activity" provide the *experiential* common ground linking the still and active phases of the mind. The still and active phases therefore have a nondual relationship as different but inseparably linked phases of the one undivided mind.... Zhu Xi sees them not merely as complementary opposites but as *mutually interpenetrating* phases of mind/heart. This is where Zhou Dunyi's writings become relevant, for they provide the philosophical/ cosmological grounding for this experiential discovery. (101f)

With this, Adler turns a page in Zhu Xi—Zhou Dunyi scholarship which can never be turned back. It is a tremendous insight that will spawn new research and pave the way for new insights into these two grand masters of the learning of the Way (*Daoxue*). This book is certainly a *must-read* for any serious student of not just Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi, and the *Dao* succession, but of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in general. Adler's account of Zhu Xi's acute spiritual crisis and his discovery of salvation in Zhou Dunyi's life and writings is an intriguing read, providing unparalleled insight into not just the intricacies of Confucian thought but into Confucian spirituality and religiosity.

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